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ABSTRACT

An ongoing study seeks to identify effective curriculum policies and classroom practices in high-performing rural elementary schools that contribute to positive outcomes for students with disabilities and low-income students. Schools in Maryland and Delaware were first ranked by the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-priced meals (FARMs). Schools above the 50th percentile were examined to identify those that were above the state average in reading and math and had the highest-ranked performance for special education students. Six schools in Maryland and four in Delaware were eligible for further study. Correlations between school-level assessment and demographic data indicated that the strongest relationship for general education students was between student performance and eligibility for FARMs. There was no significant relationship between the performance of students with disabilities and FARMs or any other school-level demographic variables. Regardless of the type of disability, if special education students took the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program test, they performed better in schools that reported high results for all students. These findings suggest a "school effect," such as access to high-quality curriculum and instruction, which is working for all students. The second phase of the study will examine the policies and practices of these schools through site visits to the schools; classroom observations; and interviews with principals, general and special education teachers, and local special education directors. (TD)

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LSS Spotlight on Student Success

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Preliminary Findings on High-Performing Rural Elementary Schools in Maryland and Delaware: Identifying Schools That Are Getting Results for All Students

by Margaret J. McLaughlin, Elizabeth Caron, Sandra Embler, & Jennifer Kling, University of Maryland

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The cornerstone of educational reform has been the specification of rigorous content and performance standards designed to guide curriculum and instruction in the classroom. These standards are critical to ensuring that every student receives instruction in the same demanding content. Through the use of assessments and by making educators accountable for student performance, policymakers are attempting to create uniform opportunity for all students.

For students with disabilities, common content and performance standards have been a more recent policy initiative. New requirements in the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Public Law 105-17) stipulate that students with disabilities are to be included in the general accountability system and in state and local assessments. The amendments further require that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum. Together, these requirements are designed to bring students with disabilities fully into the educational reforms under way in public schools, including exposure to the same high standards.

In an effort to expand the knowledge base on successful practices in schools that are achieving results for different groups of students, including low-income students and those receiving special education, researchers from the University of Maryland have undertaken an examination of rural elementary schools in Maryland and Delaware in a multi-year research project entitled Ensuring High Standards for Every Student through Access to the Curriculum. Currently, there is limited information on the inclusion of students with disabilities and low-income students in standards and accountability measures in rural schools. The research will focus on practices at the K–6 level designed to support true access to the rigorous new curriculum by identifying capacity-building strategies that are believed to enhance achievement for all students.

Goals of the Project

The primary goals of the project are (a) to identify high-performing rural elementary schools in the two target states[1]; and (b) to identify effective curriculum policies and classroom practices that appear to contribute to positive outcomes for students with disabilities and low-income students. During this first phase of the research, we undertook extensive data collection at the state, district, and local levels in Maryland and Delaware to identify individual schools for further in-depth study. The second phase of the research will include interviews with district special education directors and other curriculum administrators, site visits to schools to conduct classroom observations, and interviews with selected staff members.

The School Selection Process

We used a multistep process to identify high-performing rural elementary schools. Figure 1 illustrates the school selection process. First, rural districts were identified using the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data Public School and School District Locator. Data were then collected on the rural districts and individual schools within each district. A number of variables were examined, including student demographics (ethnicity, eligibility for free and reduced-priced meals [FARMs], Title I, Limited English Proficient [LEP] and special education enrollment); staffing data (number of teachers, teacher-student ratio, teachers' level of training); student performance on state-level assessments; student assessment participation data; and school accountability indices. Data were disaggregated by special education, Title I, and LEP status when available. Data were collected from 54 schools in Maryland and 11 schools in Delaware. State-level accountability, assessment, and special education personnel in Maryland and Delaware verified the data and the data collection procedures, as well as the criteria for selecting the high-performing schools in each state.

The schools were first ranked by the percentage of students eligible for FARMs. Only those schools above the

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50th percentile for the state were eligible for further examination. These high-poverty schools were then examined to identify those that were above the state average in reading and math for general education students and had the highest ranked performance for special education students. Only six high-performing rural Maryland schools and four high-performing rural Delaware schools were eligible for further study.

The Performance of Rural Schools

The identified rural schools in Maryland and Delaware were all above their states' averages in both reading and math performance. In terms of demographic characteristics, these schools had slightly higher percentages of students eligible for FARMs than the state average. While the six rural Maryland schools generally had higher percentages of minority and special education students than the state average, these percentages were generally below the state average for the four rural Delaware schools. Compared with the state averages, the Maryland rural schools had fewer LEP students and generally more Title I students. At the time of this report, Delaware state averages were not available for LEP and Title I students.

Pearson Product Moment correlations were computed between school-level assessment and demographic data. The strongest relationship for general education students was between student performance and eligibility for FARMs. The relationship between eligibility for FARMs and the performance of students with disabilities on the state assessment was not significant, although this may be due to the small number of special education students in these rural schools. Similarly, there were no significant relationships found between the performance of students with disabilities and any other school-level demographic variables.

The percentage of special education and LEP students who were exempt from assessments did not relate to overall student performance in the school. General education and (weighted) special education student performance on the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program were significantly correlated at the .01 level on all subtests in third and fifth grade. Regardless of the type of disability, if special education students took the test, these students performed better in schools that reported high results for all students. These findings suggest a "school effect," such as access to high-quality curriculum and instruction, which is working for all students.

The second phase of our research will examine these curricular and instructional policies and practices through site visits to the schools, classroom observations, and interviews with general and special education teachers and principals. Interviews will also be conducted with the local special education directors in the rural districts or local educational agencies. Future issues of the *Spotlight on Student Success* will address the findings from our examination of the policies and practices in these high-performing rural schools that support positive outcomes for all students, including curricular accommodations, professional development, collaboration, and differentiated instruction.

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Footnote

[1] The research will be expanded to include New Jersey and Pennsylvania in years three and four of the project.

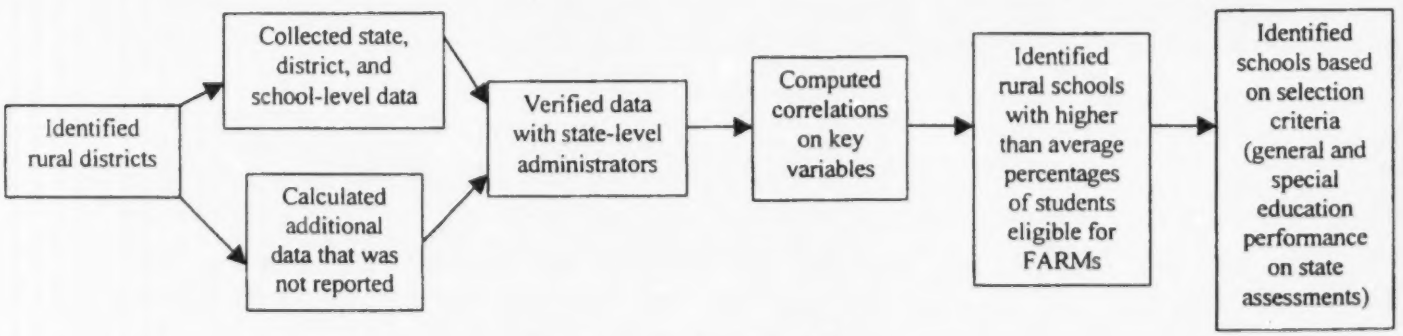
Identified rural districts
Collected state, district, and school-level data
Calculated additional data that was not reported
Verified data with state-level administrators
Computed correlations on key variables
Identified rural schools with higher than average percentages of students eligible for FARMs
Identified schools based on selection criteria (general and special education performance on state assessments)

Figure 1. **School Selection Process**

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